

Building Literacy in all classrooms

by Melissa Brandt

As new teachers embark on the challenge of the classroom, they are given a barrage of guidance: be nice to students, but not friends; care, but be firm; establish rules, but let the kids work out the procedures; incorporate high-quality literacy, but keep it interesting. It's enough to send the faint of heart running for the hills. There are plenty of resources available to help guide teaching in appropriate rule setting, but what about the incorporation of literacy? The good news is that there are resources for literacy challenges, too. Answers that will help keep kids learning without sacrificing interest in any content areas. In fact, all of these challenges can be accomplished through a change in mindset, an understanding of disciplinary literacy, and an inclusion of literacy techniques in a classroom setting.

The first step a teacher must take in order to tackle engagement and literacy is one of addressing mindset. It might seem strange to start with a discussion of literacy with mentality, but the frame of mind with which both teachers and students enter the classroom can have an enormous impact on the collective students' ability to learn. Leading researcher, Carol S. Dweck, has been exploring the theories of fixed versus growth mindsets for decades, and she emphasizes the idea of malleable intelligence. Dweck (2000) calls the growth or malleable mindset theory "an "incremental theory" of intelligence, because intelligence is portrayed as something that can be increased through one's efforts" (p. 3). Dweck (2000) goes on to state, "with this view (students) will readily sacrifice opportunities to look smart in favor of opportunities to learn something new" (p. 3). The idea that *all* students

can learn is not revolutionary, but how many times do educators hear the words, “you can’t reach them all” echo through the hallways? If a teacher enters her classroom believing she “can’t reach them all,” why are we surprised that there are kids who “don’t care” and don’t believe in themselves? Mindset must go both ways. Educators must believe in the idea that intelligence isn’t something with which we are born; intelligence can and should be cultivated. To do this, Dweck suggests establishing an environment in which mistakes are the norm. Mistakes must be an accepted part of the learning process. In addition, she recommends moving away from performance-oriented goals and moving towards growth and learning goals: “When children are focused on measuring themselves from their performance, failure is more likely to provoke a helpless response. When children are instead focused on learning, failure is likely to provide continued effort” (Dweck, 2000, p. 17). In short, mistakes can actually act as a motivation for students, but we must make errors an acceptable part of the learning process in the classroom, and we must enter the classroom with the belief that all students can learn.

In addition to accepting a growth mindset and embracing error, to advance and develop students with strong literacy skills, teachers shouldn’t assume that because a student is a good reader, that student will know how to comprehend complicated texts. Reading and writing must be taught across disciplines, the implication being the same rigor must be applied when teaching students how to read a math text as a social studies text. Two of the best literacy resource texts I have found to help teachers develop literacy in the classroom are *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning* and *Developing Readers in the Academic*

Disciplines both by literacy consultant, author, and educator, Doug Buehl. In the *Classroom Strategies* text, Buehl includes many instructional tools, guides, and reproducibles to assist teachers in the development of literacy in all content areas. In his *Developing Readers* book, Buehl delves into the importance of educating student literacy and writing: “Disciplinary literacy necessitates that we conceptualize reading and writing as contextually dependent practices; students are expected to become many different kinds of readers and writers” (Buehl, 2011, p. 13). In other words, just as humans “code switch” depending on the people with whom they interact, there is a sort of code switching that must be done by students in order to shift from understanding a math text versus understanding of a social studies text. Often, as teachers, we understand this switch to be automatic, but for many students, the difference must be first explained for comprehension. Currently, many teachers maintain the attitude of “inoculation mentality: Provide excellent instruction to beginning readers, and they will be inoculated as readers, able to subsequently withstand increasingly more complex reading challenges without help or explicit teaching” (Buehl, 2011, p. 17). Contrary to this belief, the last several years have proven the opposite, and Buehl (2011) states that there has been an “unprecedented shift” and an onslaught of U.S. Policy to support the need for continued literacy instruction at all academic levels (p. 18).

To support the need for continued literacy, Buehl (2011) considers the following statement from the National Council of Teachers of English: In middle and high school, students encounter academic discourses and disciplinary concepts in such fields as science, mathematics, and the social

sciences that require different reading approaches...These new forms, purposes, and processing demands require that teachers show, demonstrate, and make visible to students how literacy operates within the academic disciplines (p. 19).

The responsibility of teaching literacy has become the responsibility of all grade levels and all disciplines. The question then becomes, how do we do it? How do we incorporate and teach high-quality literacy in the classroom?

There are answers and tools that every teacher can take into the classroom that will help promote literacy. If we examine Buehl's basic approach to classroom literacy, it is divided into four parts: teaching for comprehension, frontloading, guiding comprehension, and consolidating understanding. He explains "teaching for comprehension" as an understanding on the teachers' part that each academic discipline is seeped in an individual discourse.

If students are what Buehl (2011) refers to as "discourse outsiders," they may feel...overwhelmed or even alienated by all the academic jargon—the outsider's depiction of a discourse—in a biology text, a math lesson, a history passage, or a literary interpretation. People who are outsiders in a discourse need support and mentoring with encountering texts packed with insider knowledge (p. 53).

In the classroom, this might look like greater emphasis on vocabulary through word-webs, concept maps, and questioning charts. Buehl also recommends bridging knowledge gaps by finding authors whom students can relate or connect to both academically and socially. Frontloading or "the instruction preceding reading that

addresses assumed academic knowledge” (Buehl, 2011, p. 121), in combination with teaching for comprehension, will build literacy and knowledge as well. Frontloading can be done through numerous strategies such as word associations, brainstorming, and knowledge maps that work to help students develop academic bridges to content. Guiding for comprehension focuses on the concept of questioning while reading and assisting readers through structured thinking or metacognition. Lastly, Buehl discusses consolidating understanding and helping students maintain essential knowledge through fact pyramids. Fact pyramids help students understand what might be a background detail or short-term information versus essential knowledge or what students would want to remember over time (Buehl, 2009, p. 34). Currently when encountering complex texts, a student with weak literacy skills may skim a text for the answer they need, read the words without processing what a passage means, or read a passage and quickly forget what’s been read (Buehl 33). Buehl has provided a few tools to help students move beyond these surface reading processes.

Researcher Susan Zimmermann in her book *7 Keys to Comprehension* mirrors Buehl’s strategies and provides fundamental comprehension processes that can bring literacy instruction into the classroom as well. Zimmerman suggests that proficient readers: 1) create mental images, 2) use background knowledge, 3) ask questions, 4) make inferences, 5) determine the most important ideas and themes, 6) synthesize information, and 7) use “fix-up” strategies (Zimmerman, 2003). Proficient readers all ready know how to apply these processes to their reading. They draw on past experience, they ask questions of themselves as they read, they

create mental images of what's happening on the page, and so on. Classroom practices adopting Zimmerman's insights offers an opportunity to advance all students' comprehension and proficiency.

The obligation of high-quality literacy instruction is the responsibility of teachers across all disciplines, and although it is no easy task, the resources and suggestions provided within this essay will hopefully help new teachers recognize the importance of a growth mindset, understand the significance of teaching literacy across disciplines, and develop the promotion of literacy techniques in a classroom setting through guided strategies.

Reference

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